



Economic Change Was an Important Factor in Causing the American Civil War

What is this research about?

The American Civil War (1861-1865) was fought between the Union and the southern states, which had legal slavery. President Abraham Lincoln, elected in 1860, and the Republican Party opposed the expansion of slavery. But, before the war, Lincoln and the Republicans agreed not to disturb slavery where it existed. Much later during the war, on January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the 'Emancipation Proclamation,' which freed the slaves in the areas that might be conquered. During the war, the North also adopted many economic measures. These included:

- a homestead act
- a national banking act
- a transcontinental railroad
- a uniform currency
- a protective tariff.

The cause of the war remains controversial.

What you need to know:

Past research on the American Civil War has not given sufficient emphasis to the importance of economic change. Many still believe that the main cause of the Civil War was slavery.

What did the researchers do?

Marc Egnal in York University's Department of History asked the question: what caused the American Civil War? To answer this question, the researcher worked with the Congressional Record, printed sources, and archival documents in the Library of Congress in D.C., as well as repositories in Chapel Hill, N.C., and Philadelphia. Research assistants helped look at voting data and make typescripts from photocopies of archival material.

What did the researchers find?

The researcher argues that economic change in the North and South caused the Civil War more than any other factor. For example, the trade of the Northwest and the political loyalties of this region changed. Before 1850, most trade from this area flowed down the Mississippi River. After mid-century it went east along the Great Lakes and Erie Canal. Also, before mid-century, the South benefited from the efforts of the national government to expand the slaveholding domain. After mid-century, the North made clear its opposition to expansion. The Republican Party, which emerged in the 1850s was mainly concerned with the Northern economy. Improving the lot of African Americans was a secondary concern.

How can you use this research?

The research highlights both the importance of individuals and the power of ideology. It expands theory of American history by helping to explain the influence and actions of many leaders. It also notes the significance of concerns of the time, such as antislavery and religious beliefs.

About the Researcher

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Citation

This research was communicated through three academic articles on the American Civil War, numerous conference papers, and the following book:

Egnal, M., & Blair, T. L. V. (2009). *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War*. New York: Hill and Wang. Preview available online at <http://bit.ly/1nDuLsT>

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